



**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**

---

**Millington, Chris** (2015) *Communist Veterans and Paramilitarism in 1920s France: The Association républicaine des anciens combattants*. *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 8 (4). pp. 300-314. ISSN 1752-6272

---

**Downloaded from:** <http://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/621613/>

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Publisher:** Taylor & Francis

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/17526272.2015.1108583>

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

It is well documented that the interwar French extreme right sought to attract the support and membership of the veterans of the Great War. For the nationalist leagues, the veteran represented the epitome of patriotic values and his unrivalled moral legitimacy contrasted starkly with the alleged rottenness of the Third Republican political class. Furthermore, his experience of military combat was thought useful in the street battles against the new enemy on the revolutionary left. What is less well known is the case of French veterans on the extreme left of politics. The most significant group was the Association républicaine des anciens combattants (ARAC). Founded in 1917 by socialists Paul Vaillant-Couturier and Raymond Lefèvre, with the support of *Le Feu* author Henri Barbusse, the ARAC was a federation of provincial veterans' associations. Antoine Prost writes that the founding of the association heralded a new radicalism in the veterans' movement for the ARAC's overtly political character distinguished it from other ex-servicemen's organisations (Prost, 1977, vol. 1: 38). Certainly the largest *anciens combattants* groups – the conservative Union nationale des combattants (UNC) and the centre-left Union fédérale (UF) – ostensibly rejected all politics as tainted by factional self-interest. The UNC and the UF envisaged (rhetorically, at least) a largely apolitical 'civic' role for their members. On the other hand, the ARAC advocated a revolutionary socialism. Lefèvre intended that the veterans of the ARAC would act as a liaison between the urban and the rural working class and thus facilitate a revolution in France akin to those that had taken place in Russia and Hungary (Lefèvre, 1919: 1).

The ARAC's revolutionary character was cemented after July 1923 when communists rose to positions of influence in the association's leadership. Under the tutelage of Vaillant-Couturier, Barbusse and Jacques Duclos, the ARAC became a

satellite organisation of the French party (Vergnon, 2009: 30). Its mission came to resemble that of the German Roter Frontkämpferbund (RFB): to spread communist propaganda amongst urban workers and veterans. The results were decidedly mixed. The size of the ARAC's membership fluctuated during the 1920s, with periods of growth (1917-1923) matched by periods of near-disastrous decline (1927-1930). Despite the association's continuous appeals to the proletariat, the makeup of its support was diverse, including salaried workers, minor public officials, small business owners and artisans (Prost, 1977, vol. 2: 178). The membership stabilised at around 20,000 during the 1930s, with a significant number of adherents (approximately 6300) based in the Seine department (Prost, 1977, vol. 2: 47n35, 54, 64). It was at this time too that the ARAC began to publish a regular newssheet, *Le Réveil du combattant*. Up to that point, its publications had appeared rather haphazardly, with the group's first newspaper, *L'Ancien combattant*, published in 1919 and undergoing a series of name changes during the decade from *Le Combattant* to *L'Antiguerrier*. ARAC sections in the provinces also produced newssheets and leaflets.

Little historical work exists on the ARAC. Prost's magisterial study of the French veterans' movement tackles the association tangentially. Like the extreme right-wing Croix de Feu, Prost judges the ARAC too political to be included in the scope of his study, stating that it was 'on the margins' of the veterans' movement during the interwar years (Prost, 1977, vol. 2: 47). My own work on the French veterans concerned only the largest associations and, under the influence of the ongoing debate about the strength of French interwar fascism, it privileged the veterans' relationship with the extreme right over their links to the left (Millington, 2012). Scholarship on veterans in other European countries has shown that the right

was not alone in its appeal to returning soldiers. As Matt Bucholtz has demonstrated, while the image of the German *Frontkämpfer* was appropriated by the extreme right, evidence suggests that the politics of returning soldiers was much more complex; an array of extremist and Republican groups laid claim to this constituency (Bucholtz, 2015). In Italy, too, though Fascism attempted to entice veterans into its ranks, Republican veterans' associations such as Italia Libera contested the Fascists' claim to the front generation (Prezioso, 2015).

In the first instance, this article sheds light on this hitherto unexplored aspect of the French veterans' political culture: how did *anciens combattants* of the extreme left conceive of both the war experience and their role in post-war French society? Secondly, the article examines the ARAC's role in the 1920s culture of paramilitarism that developed in France as elsewhere in Europe. In the mid-1920s the association founded uniformed paramilitary units known as the Groupes de défense antifascistes (GDA) in response to the emergence into politics of fascist-style leagues. Left-wing paramilitarism in France, especially that of veterans of the Great War, offers an up till now under-investigated window onto not only the veterans' movement but also onto French politics in the post-war decade. Prost has argued that the patriotic pacifism of French veterans largely protected French society from post-war 'brutalisation' (a theory first advanced by George Mosse) that seemed to lay at the basis of the paramilitary conflict in the nations left defeated or disappointed in the aftermath of the war (Prost, 1994; Mosse, 1990). However, moving beyond Mosse, recent research has instead stressed the importance of the 'mobilizing power of defeat' in the vanquished nations. A 'culture of defeat' developed in which the unsatisfactory end to the war seemed to legitimise the use of violence for political, national and ethnic ends (Gerwarth & Horne, 2013: 2-4).

Conversely France enjoyed a 'culture of victory' reinforced by the election in 1919 of a right-wing government whose perceived upholding of wartime values brought most French - and especially the conservative right - closer to Republicanism. However, by late 1923, as paramilitary violence was coming to an end on the continent, the French 'culture of victory' seemed threatened both by the victory of the left-wing Cartel des Gauches and the emergence of the French communist party. With the Cartel more willing than the Bloc National government to reconcile with, and offer concessions to, the former German enemy, worried conservatives turned to uniformed shock squads bent on protecting France's 'national interest' from the threat of left-wing revolution (Horne, 2013: 220-231).

The ARAC had long been estranged to the culture of victory. In the aftermath of the Great War, it persistently contested the emerging memory of the conflict as a necessary and worthy sacrifice with its own version of the war as a futile slaughter of the proletariat while simultaneously calling for the post-war treaties - in which were contained the fruits of the Allied victory - to be annulled. The association retained such rhetoric even after its move toward paramilitarism, although the two sat uncomfortably alongside each other. All this suggests that if we are to understand post-war paramilitarism - and particularly its left-wing variant - we must look beyond the war experience.

### **We who bear the wounds in our flesh: The politics of the ARAC**

The ARAC was founded before the end of the Great War, on 2 November 1917, and, to a great extent it was a product of the contemporary mood on the left. In that year, sections of the French left began to display signs of disengagement from the wartime 'Sacred Union'. At its December conference in Clermont-Ferrand, France's largest

labour union the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) condemned the wartime political truce and declared its support for both US President Woodrow Wilson's peace terms and the Bolshevik Revolution. The conservative press reacted vigorously to the CGT's decision: *Le Temps* warned that France would not accept a peace inspired by socialist pacifism (Anon., 1917) while *Le Figaro* condemned the apparent preference of the union's revolutionary and pacifist minority for 'a Russian peace' (Capus, 1917). The ARAC emerged at this time and it was therefore a part of what Horne has termed 'cultural demobilisation': the 'dismantling [of] the wartime frames of mind' that began to develop on the extreme left even before the end of the conflict (Horne, 2009: 104).

The association bore the marks of this left-wing milieu and its consequent conception of the war experience differed starkly from that of the mainstream Republican associations. Rather than being a lesson in patriotism, the war had taught the veterans of ARAC a lesson in the perniciousness of militarism and the devotion to *patrie*, the war dead were 'victims of global militarism'. In turn the ARAC celebrated the 'heroic' mutineers of the Black Sea fleet, of which leading communist André Marty was the most notorious (Anon., 1922; Anon., 1923). The group pursued a policy of antimilitarism and it encouraged the membership of serving soldiers whom, it hoped, would expose the brutality and mistreatment of life in the barracks (Doussin, 2007).

The ARAC's appreciation of the war stemmed from its understanding of class conflict. It condemned all forms of patriotism as dupery intended to provide working-class cannon fodder for the French Army (termed the keystone of the 'bourgeois edifice') and the real victors of the war, Renault and Krupp (Mercier, 1922; Chanudet, 1925; ARAC, 1926). Consequently, in 1919, the ARAC scoffed at the

'orgy' at the Arc de Triomphe on 14 July and instead a cortege went to lay a wreath at Albert Bartholomé's monument in the Père Lachaise cemetery (Hanot, 1919). Provincial sections carried this message to their members. At Montluçon in 1925, comrade Chanudet described the local war memorial as 'a pillar of the hatred between peoples [erected] for profits which are not theirs' (Anon., 1925). In the event of another war, the association advocated defeatism as the best defence of the proletariat in order to undermine imperialist war (Archives nationales, Paris [hereafter AN] F7/13179: 14-15 Aug. 1927).

The ARAC was just one of a range of veterans' and political associations that invested their own significance in the memory of the war experience. From 1918, commemoration became a political stake into which groups read different meanings, whether it was the condemnation of capitalist war, the celebration of the Republic, or the glorification of the fatherland (Dalisson, 1999: 19-20). If ministers desired to impose a uniform meaning on the war – that of the victorious Republic – veterans' groups resisted attempts to transform the annual commemoration into a celebration of the armies of the Republic. Instead, the veterans placed the war dead at the heart of their ceremonies. However, the ARAC's antimilitarist slant on the commemoration of the war remained a minority view in France: few of the 36,000 war memorials erected carried the inscription 'Death to war!' (Dalisson, 2013, 114; 115; 123).

A desire for immediate rapprochement with the former enemy distanced the ARAC further from the broader veterans' movement. Lefèbvre admitted that while the German had indeed perpetrated atrocities on French territory, it was absurd to blame a nation for the crimes of its generals and a minority of reprobates. At a time when many French were calling for the Kaiser to be executed, Lefèbvre advised that the figure of the Emperor should engender hatred of imperialism rather than the

German nation (Lefèbvre, 1919: 14-15). In April 1920 the association met with German veterans at a conference in Geneva that founded the Veterans' International, described by Barbusse as the 'army of life' (Prost, 1977 vol. 1: 72; Doussin, 2007: 24). Further exchanges with German veterans' associations took place: Karl Tiedt, president of the Internationaler Bund der Kriegsoffer, spoke at the ARAC national congress in 1922 (AN F7/13179: n.d.). As for the League of Nations, after some initial enthusiasm, the ARAC soon lost confidence in the body, seeing in it a mere talking shop in which Europeans denounced war only to perpetrate violence during 'clean up' operations in their imperial possessions (Anon., 1927).

The association's conception of the 'veteran' likewise differed from that of its rivals in the movement. Vaillant-Couturier was clear in his first editorial for *L'Ancien combattant*: 'The title of veteran confers no special rights on the one who has the misfortune to bear it'. To be known as a 'veteran' was merely to enjoy little more than a status rendered by a twist of fate (Vaillant-Couturier, 1919). This declaration jarred with ideas in the majority of other ex-servicemen's associations for whom only the veteran was qualified to lead (both politically and spiritually) a rejuvenated France. Such notions contained no small amount of authoritarianism, especially in their juxtaposition of the virtuous *ancien combattant* and the rotten elected politician. Yet for the ARAC, the veteran had little reason to be proud of his elevated social status. He had not been a hero during the war; in fact, he had envied the peaceful life of the shirker back home, prayed for a 'liberating wound' to deliver him from the hell of the trenches and, upon returning home, was keen to throw his ragged uniform away with the trash (AN F7/13320: 5 April 1934; Lefèbvre, 5 July 1919). As for the much-eulogised 'trench fraternity' - a classless society in which soldiers of all rank allegedly



stood equal in the face of suffering and death - this too was a lie. On the contrary, class divisions at the front had been real and persistent (Doussin, 2007: 85-87).

The ARAC sought to portray veterans as simple workers, much like the German communist movement, which referred to soldiers as the 'proletariat in Feldgrau'. It placed itself at the forefront of the working-class movement, looking to recruit men with the 'calloused hands' of the working class (Baptiste, 1923; Bonnefille, 1923). Indeed, Prost writes of a 'sort of complementarity' between veterans' groups such as the ARAC and trade unions at the time of demobilisation when urban veterans experiencing difficulty in readjusting to civilian life turned to working-class and even revolutionary organisations (Prost, 1977, vol. 1: 58). ARAC propaganda continually associated the plight and demands of the veterans with those of the proletariat: both were to be united in the battle against the common capitalist enemy and the worker was as much 'work fodder' as the soldier was cannon fodder (AN F7/13179: n.d.a). The association's programme thus entwined demands particular to the veterans – such as a variable pension rate linked to the cost of living – with broader claims made in the name of all workers, including the eight-hour day (Lefèbvre, 1919: 12-13; Anon., 1926a: 36-43). In particular the association campaigned for an equalisation of pensions between disabled veterans and workers injured in industrial accidents, arguing that: 'There is no more glory in losing an arm on the battle field from a shell than losing an arm caught in machinery on the daily battlefield of capitalist exploitation' (Anon., 1926a: 6;46). It was therefore the task of the veterans to campaign on behalf of all workers, not just the narrow constituency of the victims of war, in order to become the standard bearer of the popular classes (Lefèbvre, 1919: 11).

However, the discourse of the association did at times draw upon the specificity of the war experience in order to highlight the special qualities of ARAC veterans. Prost cites an ARAC publication which urged the association's members in 1919, '[v]eteran, you must be a new man. You obeyed during the war, you alone must command during times of peace' (Prost, 1977, vol. 3: 148). In particular, bodily injury suffered at the front figured in the association's rhetoric, as it did in that of all veterans' groups. Secretary General of ARAC Jacques Duclos, for example, accused the veterans of the UNC of being 'not specifically veterans who were in the trenches but 'shirkers' in the rear who bore no injuries of front line soldiers'. This rendered the association neither suited to defending the rights of veterans nor speaking in their name (AN F7/13320: 10 April 1935). In addition, bodily injury and suffering seemed to bring clear-sightedness in politics. Gabriel Fargue claimed that the war was unleashed to destroy the spirit of internationalism and that 'we who bear in our flesh the deep marks of wounds caused by the most atrocious barbarism' know that this is true (Fargue, 1919). Disability figured too in the ARAC's pictorial propaganda. In August 1930, a cartoon in ARAC publication *Le Feu* depicted a crowd of workers carrying the flags of the association, the communist party and other groups affiliated to the extreme left. In the foreground, where one might have expected to see the clenched fist of the communist salute, there was a prosthesis equipped with a hook, from which flew a flag carrying the slogan 'Against imperialist war' (Anon., 1930b). Thus while the ARAC's association of the veteran with the worker differentiated it from other groups, at times it employed tropes familiar to the rest of the veterans' movement.

In line with its political concerns beyond the veterans' constituency, the ARAC practised a liberal membership policy, admitting non-veterans who had

demonstrated their commitment to the broader causes of the group. Young people, especially members of the Jeunesses communistes, were encouraged to join. At times this policy caused tension: youth member Chauvet criticised the veterans for having missed the opportunity to turn their weapons on the bourgeoisie while at the front. In contrast he claimed that the young would be 'more courageous' (AN F7/13179: 13 Nov. 1926). Women were allowed to join the ARAC too, something that, while not altogether unique in the male world of the veterans, was still unusual. In the ARAC, Marianne Rauze, a war widow and former editor of the women's newspaper *L'Équité*, was a member of the executive committee and she often spoke at the association's meetings (AN F7 13179: 22 Feb. 1926).

The ARAC's distinctiveness within the veterans' movement brought it into conflict with other ex-servicemen's associations. Initially, the group collaborated with the UF but its belligerent attitude to the admission of former officers - and the UF's preference for neutrality in political matters - saw the ARAC break with this centre-left group soon after the war. The association's conflict with the UF continued until the mid-1930s when the Popular Front strategy led communist groups toward the centre of politics. Ultimately, the UF supported the ARAC's application to join the inter-associational veterans' Confédération in 1935. As for the other heavyweight of the veterans' world – the right-wing UNC – the ARAC remained an intractable adversary. The UNC considered the extreme left-wing association to be a conduit through which communism would infiltrate the combatants' movement (Aubert, 1936). In turn ARAC accused the UNC of many crimes: it was funded by war profiteers; its members were fascists, strike breakers and wartime shirkers; its leaders collaborated with the paramilitary leagues and supported Hitler (Bonnefille, 1923; Anon., 1930a; Anon., 1937; Fonds Moscou, Fontainebleau, 19940500: 8 April

1938). Veterans in both associations worked to disrupt each other's meetings and violence broke out at times. During a meeting in Limoges in June 1926, an ARAC speaker criticised the local UNC section for its campaign to erect a war memorial in the town. Unable to stand such criticism, several UNC members in the audience attempted to invade the stage and silence the speaker. A fight broke out during which members of both organisations fought each other with canes, coshes and iron rods (AN F7/13179: 5 June 1926). Sites and ceremonies of commemoration, as well as bodies, were thus transformed into discursive and physical battlegrounds over the memory and meaning of the war.

### **Soldiers of antifascism: The Groupes de défense antifascistes**

The emergence of the fascist leagues after 1924 saw antifascism become the central pillar of the ARAC's political action. Paramilitary leagues such as the Jeunesses patriotes, the Faisceau and the Légion lauded ex-servicemen, seeing in them the vitality necessary to overturn the corrupt and decrepit democratic regime.

Antifascism took physical form in the shape of the ARAC's GDA: uniformed shock squads that were intended to confront leaguers in the streets and meeting halls of France. The decision to form antifascist action squads was taken in January 1926 and the groups were unveiled on 29 May during a meeting at the Gymnase Huyghens in Paris (Vergnon, 2009: 30). Duclos presented the uniformed men to the audience, claiming that each was ready to give their life in the struggle against fascism. He stated that these men were not given to provocation but that they would 'return blow for blow with interest'. Members then took an oath, as a delegate of the RFB (likely to have been Friedrich 'Fritz' Selbmann, noted German Communist Party activist) looked on (AN F7/13179: 30 May 1926). French revolutionary heritage was

accorded a place at the ceremony too when veteran of the Paris Commune Zéphyrin Camélinat presented a red flag to ARAC delegates (AN F7/13179: 30 May 1926).

The GDA made their first public appearance during the march to the Mur des Fédérés in late May 1926 when they paraded in tight ranks during the communist demonstration (AN F7/13179: 30 May 1926b).

Paramilitarism was central to the groups' organisation and identity. The national executive of the ARAC's defence groups sat in Paris, with responsibility at a provincial level delegated to a regional executive and local section heads each in charge of a brigade of 100 men. These brigades were subdivided into 'thirtieths', 'thirteenths' and 'sixths'. Each thirtieth had a distinctive insignia to be worn on the beret (AN F7/13179: March 1927). Such paramilitarism was essential to the ARAC's propaganda appeal. The section in Valenciennes, for example, decided to have its antifascist squads photographed in uniform; the photographs were sold as postcards (AN F7/13180: 15 November 1927). The groups held flag-dedication ceremonies that aped the *Fahnenweihe* (banner consecration) of the German RFB. Dirk Schumann has shown that on such occasions, the 'military orderliness and discipline' of RFB marchers took centre stage (Schumann, 2012: 192). In a similar vein, in Lyon comrade Thivol reported enthusiastically to his colleagues what he had seen in Paris during the 1926 march to the Mur des Fédérés: the perfect discipline of the stewards and their remarkable appearance and propriety (AN F7/13179: 7 July 1926).

The founding of the GDA saw the ARAC embrace the language and imagery of a martial masculinity that contrasted with the association's broader antimilitarist agenda. In fact, the inspiration for the GDA seemed to stem from the perceived lack of manliness on display during ARAC street action in comparison with that of the leagues. For Jacques Duclos, Armistice Day 1925 marked a low point in the

association's campaign against fascism. He contrasted the ARAC's 'tumultuous' and 'disorderly' march through the streets of Clichy with the 'disciplined' and 'militarily organised' march of the fascist legions to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Drawing on the vocabulary of a martial manliness, he recommended that the ARAC act with similar 'order', 'discipline' 'courage' and 'willpower' in order to form an 'invincible front of red combatants.' He further referenced the military experience of veterans who knew how to fight and how to defend themselves (Doussin, 2007: 36-37). While the war provided an immediate point of reference for ARAC militants, the emphasis on the virility of the left-wing activist may be traced to the pre-war period too. Marc Angenot has shown that prior to the Great War, the socialist party lionised the *militant*, described as the virile and energetic champion of the proletariat at the head of the 'socialist army'. Just as Duclos in 1925 condemned the disorderly Clichy march, pre-war socialists lambasted the docility of the 'cowardly' masses. Consequently, during both the Belle Epoque and the 1920s, revolutionary socialists saw a solution to the inertia and disorganisation of the people in the manly *militant* (Angenot, 1991: 79-82). Nevertheless, ARAC activists were keen to stress the difference between the discipline of the GDA and that of their paramilitary adversaries. Left-wing discipline was the 'freely-consented' variant of the revolutionary rather than the regimented drudgery of the parade grounds. Nevertheless, it was central to the functioning of the GDA: comrade Soudeille told members in the Lyon region, '[i]t will be necessary, comrades, to accept discipline and carry out orders given by a section leader. If we want to be strong, we must be disciplined' (AN F7/13179: 15 September 1926).

The GDA culture of manliness extended beyond their paramilitary appearance. Their associational culture underscored the masculine qualities

required of members and the readiness to commit violence if necessary. Activists required certain physical and moral qualities in the fight against fascism. In the Allier, Roger Tuélais claimed that only the 'tough shoulders' of workers' could break the fascism of league leaders General de Castelnau and Georges Valois (Tuélais, 1926). Meanwhile, Secretary General Brun told a gathering at Lyon in July 1926 that the men in the GDA should be chosen for their 'sang-froid' and discipline in order to resist provocation (AN F7 13179: 15 July 1926). *L'Humanité* likewise hailed the sang-froid of ARAC but warned, '[w]hoever crosses us will be stung' (Vaillant-Couturier, 1926). If the GDA demonstrated that some left-wing veterans were prepared to commit violence, we must acknowledge that much of the group's strategy lay in the threat, rather than the use, of violence. The Prefect of the Seine-Inférieure noted that on 28 August 1926, about 60 young people belonging to ARAC's uniformed 'antifascist centuries' had traversed several times the busiest shopping streets in Rouen in what he perceived to be a deliberately provocative act, perceiving in them the same spirit of disorder found in fascist groups. It seems he was right; *Le Combattant* lauded those comrades who had held their nerve in Rouen amongst the 'majesty of the cathedrals' (AN F7/13179: 26 Aug. 1926; 2 Oct. 1926). Yet while the emphasis lay on calmness, in the event of attack antifascist activists were ordered to 'wreck' the fascists (AN F7/13179: 25 July 1926). This manly culture of violence did not exclude the participation of women; on the contrary the group envisaged an important role for female activists who should be enrolled as nurses to treat injured comrades (AN F7/13179: 15 Sept. 1926). The ARAC's antifascist discourse and imagery thus combined physical toughness with moral discipline and the preparedness to commit violence: a pamphlet advertising the GDA depicted a

beret-wearing and uniformed veteran in the foreground with the smoking chimneys of a factory behind him. In his hand he grasped a heavy cane (AN F7/13179: n.d.b).

The GDA drew, therefore, on a broader French culture of violence that privileged the masculine qualities of non-violent self-control and bloody vengeance if attacked (Millington, 2014). Moreover, the ARAC's depiction of the manly communist militant was broadly consonant with gendered ideas of activism at the political extremes during the 1920s. Communist discourse espoused a hypermasculinity in which physically fit, muscled and brave young men were lionised as the avant-garde of the coming revolution. Party propaganda emphasised the robust physicality of these shock troops (Read, 2014: 68-71). Women, too, were urged to follow the example of their male comrades and become revolutionary companions, whether this meant selling newspapers in the street or brawling with police (Whitney, 1996: 32). Such an emphasis on physical and moral manliness was mirrored on the extreme right: the leagues' 'new man' aped the youthful and combative traits of his communist equivalent. Groups on both the extreme left and the extreme right encouraged their followers into sporting activities that would harden both their muscles and their resolve when confronted with the enemy in the street (Tumblety, 2012: 133-150). The GDA were thus symptomatic of a contemporary gendered extremist politics that posed paramilitarism as an essential political strategy; as comrade Nozat told ARAC members in July 1926: 'You see our comrades wearing a beret and carrying truncheons? Well, you must all be as disciplined as them. Only then will we be the masters' (AN F7/13179: 8 July 1926).

While the specifically veteran character of the GDA drew special attention - Jacques Deuler, a delegate of ARAC's central committee informed a meeting at Rouen in April 1926 that the aim was to create a 'veterans' force' that could be used



to support revolutionary action in the future - the association admitted youthful paramilitaries into the GDAs' affiliate, the Jeunes Gardes (AN F7/13179: 13 April 1926). The Jeunes Gardes recruited men under 25 who had not yet completed their military service. The sections made their first appearance at the ceremony to mark the eighth anniversary of the Armistice at Saint-Denis in 1926. Their paramilitarism reflected that of the parent association: at the Salle Franklin in Le Havre, the Jeunes Gardes were presented to a 1000-strong audience: 'these young people, numbering about sixty, came forward and gathered at the foot of the stage, and stood to attention. At this moment the band played the Internationale and the Jeunes Gardes Antifascistes raised a clenched fist up to their face, in the form of a salute. The room applauded their appearance frenetically' (AN F7/13179: 13 Nov. 1926). According to their press, the purpose of the Jeunes Gardes was to couple discipline with the 'drive' of youth to confront fascism with a young 'Red Front', 'solid as a rock' (Deglise, Jan. 1927; Anon., Feb. 1927).

It is undeniable that the GDA drew inspiration from foreign forms of paramilitarism. Antifascist voices in France, with the example of fascist domination in Italy still fresh in their minds, had long-demanded that the working class not let itself be terrorised by the new fascist leagues. It was with groups based in Germany, a country where the fascist takeover was yet to happen, that the ARAC had most contact. In France's eastern border regions, exchanges took place between French and German groups. The ARAC section in Strasbourg developed links with groups such as Baron Claus Zorn de Bulach's Alsatian secessionists, while the Metz section had contacts with the RFB in Sarrebruck (AN F7/13180: 4 Sept. 1927; 15 Nov. 1927). In August 1927, a delegation from ARAC's Lorraine sections attended a 'red combatants' congress in Mannheim. *L'Humanité* hailed the paramilitary orderliness

with which the German masses lined up to hear the speakers at this event (AN F7/13180: 5 Aug. 1927). That same year, the ARAC section for Alsace-Lorraine informed its members that the GDA – formed in Metz, Basse-Yutz, Algrange, Sarrebourg, Sarreguemines, Strasbourg and Mulhouse – were based on the model of the German paramilitary groups which had been so successful in obstructing the march of German fascism (AN F7/13180: 21 Jul. 1927). In fact, the decline of the French leagues in 1926 had seen Moscow order that the GDA emulate the RFB in the party's new policy of class warfare (Vergnon, 2009: 33).

It is difficult to estimate the size and success of the ARAC's antifascist squads. During 1926, groups sprang up throughout the Paris region. There is evidence that sections were founded in the provinces too: a group was established in the Rhône to protect meetings and 'prevent certain demonstrations' (Vergnon, 2009: 31; AN F7/13179: 15 July 1926). By spring 1927, the ARAC claimed to have 4000 members across the GDA and the Jeunes Gardes; at this time the association's total membership was approximately 23,000 (Anon., Mar.-Apr. 1927). That year, the first regional congress of the Jeunes gardes was held in Paris, with *Le Combattant* reporting that sixty-four delegates representing twenty-five sections had attended (AN F7/13180: May-Jun. 1927).

The Comintern's rejection of paramilitarism in 1928 saw the GDA brought to an end. The antifascist groups were proving unpopular. To some extent, the GDA were now out of step with broader developments in French politics. In comparison with Germany, where political practice, semiotics and iconography became evermore militarised, by the late 1920s the paramilitary sub-culture in France had subsided. Yet the unpopularity of the GDA seemed to run deeper than this. Many members had long disliked the groups. Discomfort was expressed with their military styling. As

early as June 1926 (one month after the launch of the GDA), comrades expressed concern that the majority of their colleagues opposed the wearing of a uniform because of its militarist connotations (AN F7/13179: 5 June 1926). Conservative enemies of the ARAC were quick to point out, too, the sartorial and gestural similarity between the new communist militia and their fascist enemies; such comparisons could not have been lost on communist members themselves (Brunoy, 1926). The communist party recognised that some comrades lacked the stomach for fighting. *Le Combattant* repeatedly called on members to support the GDA both morally and financially but it was consistently disappointed with the response (AN BB18/2793: Mar. 1929).

The seeming unpopularity of the GDA has been interpreted as evidence of a broader rejection of paramilitarism by ordinary veterans. Furthermore Stéphane Audoin has cited the communist party's concomitant decline in the late 1920s as indicative of the broader rejection of violence in French politics (Audoin, 1983). Both factors apparently point to a broader current of non-violent Republicanism not only in the veterans' movement but also in French society. It is true that the ARAC suffered a crisis of membership in the mid-1920s that coincided with its paramilitary turn. Police reported in 1926 that the ARAC had lost more than two-thirds of its members since passing into the hands of the communists (AN F7/13179: 11 Dec. 1926). By the end of the decade some sections of the ARAC were experiencing severe financial difficulties caused by a drop off in membership: members in the Parisian section numbered only 2800 with this figure declining by 10% during 1928-1929 alone (AN F7/13180: 18 Dec. 1929).

While we should not ignore the reluctance of ARAC veterans to adopt the group's paramilitary politics after 1926, we must also take into account the broader

difficulties that communist organisations faced at this time. Following the violence between communists and the Parisian police during the so-called Sacco and Vanzetti riots of August 1927, the Ministry of the Interior and the Prefect of Police (zealous anti-communist Jean Chiappe) began a crackdown on revolutionary groups. Throughout the country, departmental prefects were advised to use all means available to bring to justice any person advocating violence and antimilitarism (AN BB18/2794: 20 April 1929). Leading communists were convicted of provoking soldiers to disobedience; Duclos himself received a jail term. By 1929, the ARAC admitted that a large proportion of its members were in prison, facing prosecution or enduring constant police harassment with mere propaganda activities punished by up to five years' imprisonment (Anon., Mar. 1929). Prost writes that Chiappe had members of the GDA arrested 'by the truckload' (Prost, 1977, vol. 2, 47n35). At the group's national congress in December 1930, delegates heard that since the jailing of Duclos links between provincial groups and the central organisation had broken down, with the former acting with virtual autonomy from Paris. Meanwhile, with fewer than 20,000 members, the association needed to double the number of subscriptions to its newspaper if it was to survive (Anon., 1930c).

## **Conclusion**

The association did survive. A reorganisation in the early 1930s put the group on a surer footing and the regular publication of *Le Réveil du combattant* was sign of the ARAC's success. The cause of antifascism further ensured the survival of the association. As French politics polarised after 1934, ARAC veterans were called upon to form the nucleus of antifascist committees throughout France. Along with 28 other Parisian veterans groups, the ARAC formed the Mouvement d'action

combattante in 1934 to counter directly the appeal of French fascism to the ex-servicemen community (Prost, 1977, vol. 1: 172). It continued to contest the memory of the war and the war dead with its right-wing rivals. At the inauguration of a war memorial in June 1934, two ceremonies took place, the first led by the UNC accompanied by the singing of the Marseillaise and the flying of the tricolour flag. The second, unofficial, ceremony under the auspices of ARAC matched the symbolism of the first with the flying of the flag of the Soviet Union and the singing of the Internationale. In 1937, the UNC withdrew from the Armistice Day in protest at the ARAC being allowed to march behind a red flag (Anon., 1934; Anon., 1937).

As Europe moved closer to war, the association did not remain silent on international issues. It demanded that France supply the Republican government in Spain with arms, claiming that the embargo was prolonging the war (Doussin, 2007: 106-107). Interestingly, the ARAC's discourse during the Spanish Civil War drew on the language of civilisational conflict that was more familiar to the right. It claimed that Madrid, once a beacon of Western civilisation that had defended Europe from Arab invasion, had been set ablaze by an 'army of African Moors' and legionnaires under the command of fascist 'Franco the African', burning working-class districts and killing women and children. In the name of Humanity, the association called on Paris and London for help (Doussin, 2007: 107-108). In September 1938, the association opposed the Munich accords as a sop to 'financial oligarchies and bloody international arms dealers'. As war approached it demanded a greater effort to secure peace but declared that it would not live in servitude to the 'modern Huns' (Doussin, 2007: 138-155). The ARAC was dissolved on 1 November 1939 according to the terms of the decree of 29 September 1939. The group's leaders were arrested and the association passed into clandestinity.

On the surface, the ARAC appears to be an anomaly in the French veterans' movement. It rejected the representation of the war as a necessary sacrifice and refused in the main to admit that veterans deserved special rights. Yet though anomalous, it would be incorrect to dismiss the ARAC estranged from a broader veterans' culture. While we must admit that the association's interpretation and representation of the war years differed from those of the larger mainstream associations, even within the UF and the UNC the meaning and memory of the war, as well as the mission of the war generation was at times contested. Certainly, the great associations largely depicted the war as a noble, if murderous, sacrifice and the veterans as warriors of a French ideal. But different interpretations crept through at times, too - hardly surprising given the size of the veterans' movement itself. Furthermore, the ARAC's engagement with paramilitary politics was by no means unusual in the veterans' world: the leagues of the 1920s could not have existed without the support and membership of ex-servicemen.

The ostensibly anomalous nature of the ARAC is further present in its paramilitarism, which seems to present a case out of step with its counterparts in the rest of Europe. The GDA emerged in a nation that escaped both the brutalisation of its politics and a culture of defeat. Furthermore, the organisation from which these shock troops emanated was untouched by the culture of victory, the perceived dismantling of which sparked the birth of the extreme right-wing leagues. The case of the ARAC suggests that to look only to the war experience in search of an explanation of interwar paramilitary politics is insufficient. In the first instance, we must recognise the influence of pre-war left-wing violence in France. It seems that the heritage of the manly socialist activist, shepherding the masses into violent action against the bourgeoisie, stretched back into the late nineteenth century.

Secondly, though the war experience remained an important reference point for the GDA in terms of their paramilitary structure, membership and mystique, more immediate contextual factors – the foundation of the leagues – help to explain their establishment. Of course, Moscow ultimately directed the French party, but without the emergence of French fascism it is difficult to envisage the foundation of the GDA. The ARAC thus helps to nuance understandings not only the French veterans' movement but also the culture of paramilitarism that emerged in France in the mid-1920s.

## Works cited

*The author would like to thank Martin Simpson and the anonymous reviewers of this manuscript for their helpful comments and advice.*

Anon., 'Une faillite', *Le Temps*, 26 December 1917.

Anon., 'Avis aux Fédérations et sections: Loir-et-Cher', ARAC, March 1922.

Anon., 'Convocations', *ARAC de Roanne* 20 March 1923.

Anon., 'La vie des sections', *Le Réveil du Combattant. Montlucon-Commentry*, 15 December 1925-15 January 1925.

Anon., 'Tribune de la Jeune Garde antifasciste', *Le Combattant* February 1927.

Anon., *Victime de la Guerre... Défends-toi! Édité par le Service technique de l'ARAC* (Chartres: Imprimerie coopérative La Prolétarienne, 1926a).

Anon., 'Tribune des Jeunes Gardes et des Marins et Anciens marins: Six mois d'existence', *Le Combattant* March-April 1927.

Anon., 'Aux Anciens Combattants Calaisiens', leaflet, 1927.

Anon., 'Vive la Commune', *Le Feu* March 1929.

Anon., 'En marge de deux congrès', *Le Feu*, June 1930a.

Anon., *Le Feu*, August 1930b.

Anon., 'Rapport du Comité Central', *Le Feu*, December 1930c.

Anon., 'Un monument profané', *La Voix du combattant*, 23 June 1934.

Anon., 'L'UNC fait condamner ARAC', *La Voix du combattant*, 24 April 1937.

Anon., 'L'UNC estime que le drapeau rouge n'est pas et ne doit pas être le drapeau de la France', *La Voix du combattant*, 13 November 1937.

Marc Angenot, 'Masses aveulies et militants virils', *Politix*, 14 (1991), 79-86.

Hubert Aubert, 'Dépassement', *La Voix du combattant*, 13 June 1936.



Stéphane Audoin, 'Le parti communiste français et la violence: 1929-1931', *Revue historique*, 269 (1983), 365-384.

ARAC leaflet, Limoges, 1926.

Eugène Baptiste, 'Trois jours de propagande', *ARAC de Roanne*, 20 March 1923.

René Bonnefille, 'Responsabilités', *ARAC de Roanne*, 20 March 1923.

Pierre Brunoy, 'La milice communiste', *L'Echo de Paris*, 31 May 1926.

Matt Bucholtz, '*Kamerad* or *Genosse*? The contested *Frontkämpfer* identity in Weimar revolutionary politics', in Chris Millington and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Political Violence and Democracy in Western Europe, 1918-1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming 2015).

Alfred Capus, 'La CGT', *Le Figaro*, 27 December 1917.

F. Chanudet, 'Défense Nationale', *Le Réveil du Combattant. Montluçon-Commentry.*, 15 July-15 August 1925.

Rémi Dalisson, 'La célébration du 11 novembre ou l'enjeu de la mémoire combattante dans l'entre-deux-guerres (1918-1939)', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 192 (1999), 5-23.

---, *Les guerre et la mémoire: Enjeux identitaires et celebrations de guerre en France de 1870 à nos jours* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2013).

Maurice Deglise, 'Tribune de la Jeune garde antifasciste', *Le Combattant*, January 1927, p. 2.

Georges Doussin (ed), *L'ARAC. Association Républicaine des Anciens Combattants. 1917-2007. Combattants pour la vie. Des voix pour l'espoir* (Pantin: Le Temps des Cerises, 2007).

Gabriel Fargue, 'Notre Attitude aux prochaines élections', *L'Ancien combattant*, August 1919.

---, 'L'internationale des Anciens Combattants', *L'Ancien combattant*, September 1919.

Robert Gerwarth and John Horne, 'Paramilitarism in Europe after the Great War: An Introduction', in Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Marius Hanot, 'Nos Morts', *L'Ancien combatant*, August 1919.

John Horne, 'Demobilizing the Mind: France and the Legacy of the Great War, 1919-1939', *French History and Civilization*, 2 (2009), 100-119.

---, 'Defending victory: Paramilitary politics in France, 1918-1926. A counter-example', in Robert Gerwarth and John Horne (eds), *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 216-233.

Raymond Lefèvre, *L'Ancien soldat* (Paris: Imprimerie La Productrice, 1919)

---, 'L'ARAC et les élections', *L'Ancien combattants* August 1919.

---Raymond Lefèvre, 'Réponse à Gouttenoire de Toury', *L'Ancien combattant*, 5 July 1919

Mercier, 'Les Anciens et les Futurs Combattants', *ARAC* March 1922.

Chris Millington, *From Victory to Vichy: Veterans in Inter-war France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

---, 'Street-fighting men: Political violence in interwar France', *English Historical Review*, 129 (2014), 606-638.

George Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

Stéfanie Prezioso, 'Fighting fascism with its own weapons': A common dark side?

in Chris Millington and Kevin Passmore (eds), *Political Violence and Democracy in Western Europe, 1918-1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming 2015).

Antoine Prost, *Les Anciens Combattants et la société française, 1914-1939*, 3 vols (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des Sciences politiques, 1977).

---, 'The Impact of War on French and German Political Cultures,' *The Historical Journal*, 37 (1994), 209-217.

Geoff Read, *The Republic of Men: Gender and the Political Parties in Interwar France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

Dirk Schumann, *Political Violence in the Weimar Republic 1918-1933: Fight for the Streets and Fear of Civil War* (New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2012).

Roger Tuélais, 'Le danger Fasciste', *Le Réveil du Combattants. Montlucon-Commentry*, 15 December-15 January 1926.

Joan Tumblety, *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Uses Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France* (Oxford: Oxford university Press, 2012).

Paul Vaillant-Couturier, 'Pas de Parti', *L'Ancien combattant: Organe de l'Association Républicaine des Anciens combattants*, May 1919.

---, 'A bas la guerre!', *L'Humanité* 11 November 1926.

Gilles Vergnon, *L'antifascisme en France* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

Susan B. Whitney, 'Embracing the Status Quo: French Communists, Young Women and the Popular Front', *Journal of Social History*, 30 (1996), 39-53.

